

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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FBO-02 MCT-01 DHA-02 CCO-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSC-05 SP-02 OC-06 OPR-02 PA-01 USSS-00 PRS-01 SCA-01

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SUBJECT: STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS ON FRIDAY

REF: PANAMA 6320

1. THE SEPTEMBER 10 DEMONSTRATIONS, WHICH DEGENERATED INTO A RIOT IN DOWNTOWN PANAMA CITY, WERE THE LARGEST AND MOST VIOLENT STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS SINCE THE RISE OF TORRIJOS. CROWD ESTIMATES BEING WHAT THEY ARE, IT IS DIFFICULT TO SAY HOW MANY PERSONS PARTICIPATED. THE ORDER OF MAGNITUDE WAS 1,500 TO 3,000.

2. THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED PRESS HAS PUT THE NUMBER OF INJURED AT 42 (ONLY ONE OF WHOM WAS HOSPITALIZED), THE NUMBER OF ARRESTS AT 25 AND DAMAGES AT \$2 TO 3 MILLION (PROBABLY EXAGGERATED ON THE BASIS OF ESTIMATES OF OVER-INSURED MERCHANTS). NUMBER OF STUDENTS (AND NON-STUDENT HOODLUM DEMONSTRATORS) ARRESTED IS HIGHER THAN GOVERNMENT
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FIGURES, PERHAPS AS MANY AS 200. THE MOST SALIENT

POINTS TO BE MADE ABOUT THE EVENTS OF FRIDAY ARE:

A. THE GOVERNMENT APPROVED THE ANTI-CHILE DEMONSTRATION SOME TIME AGO AND INDEED SUPPLIED TRANSPORTATION TO THE GOVERNMENT-SUPPORTED PANAMANIAN STUDENT FEDERATION (FEP). BUT IT HAD NOT APPROVED OR FOMENTED THE DEMONSTRATION OVER THE PRICE INCREASES.

B. THE DAY WAS A CONFUSED MELANGE OF DIFFERENT CURRENTS IN WHICH A VARIETY OF PANAMANIAN ELEMENTS WORKED OFF THEIR SEPARATE FRUSTRATIONS: SOME STUDENTS SHOOK THEIR FISTS AT THE CHILEAN GOVERNMENT, OTHERS DEMONSTRATED THEIR ANGER OVER THE COST OF LIVING. THE FEP AND ITS FAR-LEFT RIVAL REVOLUTIONARY STUDENT FRONT (FER) (FROM RIVAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS) FOUGHT EACH OTHER. CRIMINAL ELEMENTS TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THE TWO GROUPS' MEETING TO SMASH SHOP WINDOWS AND LOOT.

C. THE NATIONAL GUARD RESTRAINED ITSELF INITIALLY FROM TAKING ANY HARSH ACTIONS AGAINST THE STUDENTS. AT THE HEIGHT OF THE DOWNTOWN FRACAS, HOWEVER, A NUMBER OF DEMONSTRATORS GOT CLUBBED. THE LOOTING INDICATES THAT THE SITUATION GOT OUT OF HAND FOR AT LEAST A COUPLE OF HOURS AROUND MIDDAY. A MID AFTERNOON DOWNPOUR COOLED THE SITUATION OFF, BUT STUDENTS FROM THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE HOLED THEMSELVES UP IN THEIR FORTRESS-LIKE BUILDING, AND THE NATIONAL GUARD USED TEAR GAS TO DISLODGE THE STUDENTS IN THE EARLY EVENING.

3. COMMENT: THESE DISTURBANCES HAVE A NUMBER OF POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS. FIRST, THE GOVERNMENT OBVIOUSLY GOOFED IN ANNOUNCING THE PRICE INCREASES WITHOUT PREPARING THE PUBLIC FOR THE MEASURE AND JUST PRIOR TO THE LONG-PLANNED ANTI-CHILE DEMONSTRATION. THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT LARGE NUMBERS OF THE DEMONSTRATORS PROTESTING THE PRICE INCREASES WERE LOOKING FOR AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS THEIR DISPLEASURE TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT. THE MEETING OF THE TWO STUDENT GROUPS ON CENTRAL AVENUE, PLUS THE ADDITION OF CRIMINAL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ELEMENTS FROM THE ADJACENT SLUM AREAS SPARKED THE DAY'S VIOLENCE.

4. DESPITE STRONG ANTI-GOVERNMENT OVERTONES, WE KNOW OF NO INSTANCE OF DEMONSTRATORS CALLING FOR THE FALL OF THE TORRIJOS REGIME. NEVERTHELESS, THE GENERAL UNEASINESS WHICH HAS BEEN BOLING BENEATH THE SURFACE HAS ERUPTED. UNSURPRISINGLY THE FOCUS OF COMPLAINT

IS THE UNSATISFACTORY ECONOMIC SITUATION. EXCEPT FOR
THE INSIGNIFICANT FLAG INCIDENT (REFTEL) THE DEMON-
STRATION HAD NO ANTI-AMERICAN COLORATION.
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